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June 29, 2005

VIA HAND DELIVERY

Ms. Victoria J. Rutson
Chief, Section of Environmental Analysis
Surface Transportation Board
1925 K Street, N.W., Room 504
Washington, D.C. 20423

Re: Finance Docket No. 34658, The Alaska Railroad Corp. -- Petition For Exemption From 49 U.S.C. §10901 To Construct and Operate a Rail Line Between Eielson Air Force Base (North Pole, Alaska) and Fort Greely (Delta Junction)

Dear Ms. Rutson:

Enclosed for your information please find a final field report prepared by ABR, Inc., Environmental Research & Services of Fairbanks, Alaska entitled "Aerial Surveys To Identify Raptor Nests Near Potential ARRC Routes, Eielson AFB To Fort Greely, Alaska, 2005."

Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kathryn Floyd
Kathryn Kusske Floyd

Enclosures

cc: David C. Navecky, SEA
Alex Chavrid, FRA (w/encl., via hand delivery)
David Valenstein, FRA (w/encl., via hand delivery)
Eileen Reilly, ARRC
Brett Flint, AARC

NOTE: *Because of the sensitive nature of the information, the tables and figures of this document, which detail the locations of nest sites, have been omitted from this posting.*

Final Field Report

**AERIAL SURVEYS TO IDENTIFY RAPTOR NESTS NEAR POTENTIAL
ARRC ROUTES, EIELSON AFB TO FORT GREELY, ALASKA, 2005**

for
HDR Alaska
2525 C Street, Suite 305
Anchorage, AK 99503

by
Robert J. Ritchie
ABR, Inc.—Environmental Research & Services
P.O. Box 80410
Fairbanks, AK 99708

22 June 2005

INTRODUCTION

ABR conducted aerial surveys for tree-and cliff-nesting raptors 14–16 and 18 May, 2005, along potential ARRC routes between Eielson AFB and Ft. Greely, Alaska. The main objectives of these surveys were to identify and determine the status of raptor nests, particularly large species including Bald and Golden eagles and Peregrine Falcons, in the general study area. We also tried to locate the nests of other tree-nesting species (e.g., Northern Goshawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and woodland owls), but advanced leaf-out conditions prevented a thorough census for these woodland species. In our original proposal, we were concerned that Peregrine Falcons, the primary cliff-nesting species in the region, would not have initiated nesting at many sites in the area by mid-May and we proposed a separate survey of cliff areas in late May. We did not conduct this late May survey, however, because we believe that the mid-May surveys were appropriately timed and provided an accurate census for this species.

STUDY AREA

We conducted surveys in a broad corridor generally between the northern and eastern shorelines of the Tanana River and the southern and western-most alignment routes (Attached Map). The

survey area extended somewhat east of the Tanana River and Richardson Highway in the lowlands between Eielson AFB and the Salcha River. Because leaf out of deciduous trees was advanced in most of the study area, our search focused on locating nests in riparian and lacustrine areas and in all cliff-nesting areas (where leaf-out is not an issue).

METHODS

A Robinson 44 (R-44) helicopter was used for all aerial surveys. (Two traditional Peregrine Falcon nesting sites, proximal to human habitation, were visited by automobile on 18 May.) Two observers (Bob Ritchie [BR] and Alex Prichard [AP], ABR) seated on the same side of the aircraft recorded all observations of nests and raptors. Nests of Common Ravens also were recorded because they build stick nests often used by other raptors. The observer in the front seat (BR) was responsible for directing the pilot, monitoring the route, and making species identifications, while the observer in the back seat (AP) also scanned terrain and recorded GPS locations of all nests. Standard operating procedures called for searches of all suitable woodland habitats, particularly riparian areas and lake shorelines, and all cliff areas.

The aircraft was flown at approximately 100–150 ft above tree tops during searches of wooded areas, while elevations of the aircraft varied at cliff sites depending on the height of outcrops and cliff faces. When a nest or adult birds were observed, the aircraft slowed and approached the site to determine nest status (i.e., inactive [no adults at nest] or occupied [incubating bird or adult at nest]) and take GPS positions. GPS readings were taken directly over or within 50 ft of all inactive tree nests. GPS readings were taken at greater lateral distances (>100 ft) from cliffs and occupied tree nests to reduce our disturbance to nesting birds. (For Peregrine Falcon nests, these readings later were adjusted using a GIS base map to more accurately portray physical location on the cliff.) Identification of nests to species was determined by the presence of adults and/or by the size and characteristics of the nest. If species use could not be determined, the nest was characterized as an ‘unknown raptor’ nest.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 81 raptor and raven nests were detected during aerial surveys in the study area (this total includes cliff ledges used by Peregrine Falcons) (Attached Map and Appendix 1; location information should be kept confidential). Bald Eagle nests were the most abundant and

comprised 46% of all nests located during the survey (Table 1). Fifty-nine percent of Bald Eagle nests were occupied and most nests were attended by an incubating adult. All but two of these nests were located on the Tanana River floodplains: one nest was located near Blair Lake and a second nest was located on the lower Salcha River near its junction with the Tanana River. Bald Eagles are a common large nesting raptor along the Tanana River and adjacent floodplain lakes (Ritchie and Ambrose 1996).

Table 1. Numbers and status of raptor and Common Raven nests in the ARRC study area, Eielson AFB to Ft. Greely, Alaska, May 2005.

Species	Status		Total Nests
	Inactive	Occupied	
Red-tailed Hawk	0	4	4
Bald Eagle	15	22	37
Peregrine Falcon	1	13	14
Great Gray Owl	0	4	4
Common Raven	2	16	18
Unidentified raptor	4	0	4
Total nests	22	59	81

Nests of Peregrine Falcons were the second most abundant (14 cliff sites, including one unoccupied but traditional nest site) and Peregrine Falcons were the only cliff-nesting raptor located during our surveys, excepting occasional cliff-nesting Common Ravens. Peregrines have a long history of nesting along the Tanana River and its tributaries between Delta Junction and Fairbanks (Cade 1960); however, the nests located during this survey on the Little Delta River and Delta Creek have not been recorded previously. Although no Golden Eagle nests were located during this survey, Golden Eagle nests have been recorded on cliffs along the upper Tanana River (R. Ritchie, unpubl. data).

Other large woodland raptor species nesting in the study area include Red-tailed Hawk, Northern Goshawk, Osprey, Great-horned Owl, and Great Gray Owl. Only nests of the Red-tailed Hawk and Great Gray Owl were recorded, however, during this survey. Six of eight nests of these species (88%) were located in spruce trees. Ospreys have been recorded nesting on the perimeter of the study area (e.g., on the GVEA Tanana Flats Intertie and Shaw Creek; R. Ritchie, unpubl. data), but no Ospreys or nests were recorded during our surveys in the ARRC study area. In

addition, although Northern Goshawks and Great-horned Owls have been recorded nesting in the study area in the past and some of the unknown raptor nests may have been constructed or used by these species, no nests of either species were located during these surveys in 2005.

As has already been mentioned, leaf-out of deciduous trees was nearly complete in all areas except some islands on the Tanana River and in some 'cool' micro-environments such as aufeis patches along the Delta and Little Delta rivers. Therefore, woodland species, such as Red-tailed Hawks, are under-represented. Earlier, more systematic surveys would be required to adequately census for nests of woodland species. However, in addition to extensive leaf cover obscuring their nests, the absence of Northern Goshawks and Great Horned Owls may also reflect low numbers of key prey species (i.e., snowshoe hares; McGowan 1975, Houston et. al. 1998).

LITERATURE CITED

- Cade, T. 1960. Ecology of Peregrine and Gyrfalcon populations in Alaska. Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool. 63:151-290.
- Houston, C. S., D. G. Smith and C. Rohner. 1998. Great Horned Owl. The Birds of North America, No. 372. 28 pp.
- McGowan, J. D. 1975. Nesting habits and reproductive success of Goshawks in Interior Alaska. Pages 147-152 in J. R. Murphy, C. M. White, and B. E. Harrell (eds). Population Status of Raptors. Raptor Research Foundation, Inc. Raptor Research Report No. 3. 232 pp.
- Ritchie, R. J., and Ambrose, R. E. 1996. Distribution and population status of Bald Eagles in Interior Alaska. Arctic 49: 120-128.